

Crunch time for bridging \$6B gap: Lawmaker wants all plans on table

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SACRAMENTO -- Today is the day for lawmakers to pony up ideas for hacking an additional \$6 billion out of the state's spending plan or filling that remaining gap with new taxes, the legislators' chief budget writers say.

"It may be the most significant day in the whole conference committee (process)," said state Sen. Steve Peace, D-Chula Vista, co-chairman of the joint committee crafting the almost \$80 billion spending plan. "It may tell us how seriously we're going to take this."

But Capitol insiders dismiss that talk. Any significant suggestion will be made behind closed doors. And rare is the lawmaker who wants to propose painful cuts or unpopular tax increases -- especially in broad daylight.

But Peace said he wants "to get everything on the table ... including Democrats' inclination to support a tax increase or not to support it."

Peace and his co-chairwoman, Assemblywoman Jenny Oropeza, D-Long Beach, have earmarked one hour this morning, from 10 to 11, to hear from their colleagues -- which cynics note breaks down to 30 seconds per lawmaker.

For veteran legislators, it's a cruel twist on an old tradition. "Members Day" used to be a time to make their case before the budget committee for programs that would benefit their districts.

This year, not only do they get an hour instead of a day, but they've been warned in writing that "the conference committee is attempting to close a significant deficit. We encourage you to suggest ways to close that gap by either suggesting expenditure reductions or revenue alternatives."

The conference committee is hashing out the differences between the plans put forward by the Assembly and the Senate, both of which are based on Gov. Gray Davis' budget, which relies on spending cuts, tax increases and borrowing to bridge a \$23.6 billion budget shortfall.

The Capitol's most outspoken proponents of tax increases, two powerful Democrats from San Francisco, already have made their suggestions, and neither plans to take part in what some staff members have snidely labeled "Members Hour."

Senate President Pro Tem John Burton already has introduced a controversial bill that could raise billions by increasing the income tax on California's richest families. And Assemblywoman Carole Migden would increase the vehicle registration tax even more than the governor has proposed.

Several unions that depend on the state for income have proposed tax increases beyond the car and cigarette tax increases Davis has proposed. Some local officials, fretting about a crippling loss of income, also have suggested raising taxes.

But whether anyone will stand before the budget committee on their own and announce their support for taxes, which many consider an election-year taboo, remains to be seen.

Some legislative staff members say it's more likely members will suggest shifting money, essentially saving one program at the expense of another.

Either way, any public dialogue is better than nothing, said Ted Lascher, a political-science professor at California State University, Sacramento.

"I don't think the only measure of courage is for someone to fall on their sword and say they'll support some big tax," he said. "To me it would be more valuable if people talk about the whole range of options. People might say something like, 'If revenue enhancements are going to be looked at, these are better than those.' I think that discussion can be useful."

But others in the Capitol say the fact the committee has allotted only one hour proves it is "a cynical exercise."

Sens. Michael Machado, D-Linden, and Chuck Poochigian, R-Fresno, will not attend the meeting. Neither will Assemblywoman Barbara Matthews, D-Tracy, who said she already has offered a bill that would save \$1 million in state overtime by exempting prison guards from jury duty, "since they're never picked anyway."